

Selecting and Implementing a Computerized Case Management System: A Guide for Managers

***With a special appendix reviewing eight systems
currently in use by
legal services programs***

**by Colleen Cotter and Julia Gordon
on behalf of Legal Aid of East Tennessee**

February 10, 2004

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Executive Summary

Case management systems can be powerful tools for legal services programs. They can support the work of intake staff and staff attorneys; provide information that can be used to supervise staff; allow programs to extract the information they need to reports to funders; provide managers with an understanding of the work their program does; and provide programs with information about the programs' clients and the impact their work has on their lives.

This report aims to help programs choose a case management system that is appropriate for them and to maximize their use of the tools it provides. The report was commissioned by Legal Aid of East Tennessee (LAET), which received a Technology Initiative Grant from the Legal Services Corporation for this project, and it was conducted by legal services consultants Colleen Cotter and Julia Gordon.

To write the report, the authors reviewed eight case management systems currently used by legal services programs. Specific research included:

- Interviewing more than 150 users in depth.
- Surveying users at as many programs as possible.
- Surveying the vendors of the eight systems reviewed.
- Viewing demonstrations of the systems.

The report consists of three major sections. The first provides advice for programs that are considering purchasing a new case management system or that want to make better use of their current system. That section includes information on:

- Putting together an effective process for selection.
- Determining what you need the system to do.
- Assessing internal resources available, including cost, IT support, and commitment of other staff.
- Training staff well and often.

- Planning implementation carefully and thoroughly.

The second section of the report offers a description of the various features available in current case management systems and how they work. Features covered include:

- Timekeeping.
- Calendar/Tickler Systems.
- Contact Management.
- Intake, Eligibility, Opening, and Closing Cases.
- Conflict checking.
- Maintaining Electronic Files / Document Management.
- Document Assembly.
- Pro Bono Support.
- Reporting.
- Grants Management / Resource Development.
- Access and Security.

The third section of the report examines several more general characteristics of case management systems, including:

- User friendliness.
- Training.
- Stability.
- Customization and Flexibility.
- Vendor Support.

These sections of the report provide neutral information that applies to all currently available case management systems. Specific information about the eight systems reviewed can be found in the Appendices to the report.

I. Introduction

A. Background

New computer technologies have made a tremendous difference in the way we practice law. From word processing to Westlaw, we have found faster and more effective ways to do our legal work on behalf of low-income individuals and communities. In a few short years, legal services programs have moved from a point where most staff only had a free-standing computer on their desk (if they were lucky) to a point where almost everyone uses the internet every day.

But in no area is the power of technology more striking than in the area of computerized case management. Gone are the days of performing conflict checks using 4x6 index cards or finding lost intake sheets in piles on desks. Today, most programs use some kind of electronic database to collect information about clients, check for conflicts, manage pro bono attorneys, and crunch numbers. With the help of the computer, staff can track and report data thousands of times faster than in the days of hand-counting and calculation. Using computerized case management, programs can improve internal program operations as well as the quality of services to clients. Programs that are not yet using these systems are finding themselves behind their peers in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

A legal services program selecting a case management system (CMS or system)¹ can now choose from a full array of products.² There are a number of systems designed especially for legal services use, and there also are systems that began their lives in the private sector but have been retooled for legal services by vendors who understand the power of our market. Some of these systems are comparatively expensive, while others are relatively cheap. Some are simple, while others have more robust functionality and numerous “bells and whistles.” Some have been around the community for a while, and others have only recently broken into the legal services market.

B. What This Report Does

This report provides a layperson’s guide to the world of case management systems. While it does also provide some information about the features of specific CMS packages on the market right now, its main goal is to provide program directors and other staff with information about what these systems can

¹ Throughout this report the authors use the terms “system” and “CMS” to refer to case management systems and “program” to refer to legal services programs/providers.

² Because of the number of systems now available on the market, the authors of this report strongly recommend against programs building their own CMS from scratch. Research for this report indicated that many of the available systems can be extensively customized for far less cost and effort than would be required to build one, especially the systems built on an open source platform.

do – not from a technical point of view, but from the point of view of the functionalities of the system as experienced by users.³

In researching this report, the authors found that no legal services program interviewed for the report is currently using its CMS to its fullest capacity on a staffwide basis. Obstacles to using the software vary, including lack of training or understanding of the system's capacities; lack of internal policies regarding CMS usage; lack of resources; staff resistance; technical problems; and, in some cases, all of the above. This finding is critical because a program may be able to meet its needs with its current software rather than by changing software – and thereby save money and staff time and energy -- if it makes a concerted effort to ensure that it is using its CMS as effectively as possible.

Given that finding, this report aims to provide information that is useful both for programs selecting a new CMS and for programs hoping to optimize the use of their current CMS. This report will not replace your own research, but it should provide you with some baseline information. The overview of CMS features and other factors to consider in selecting and/or implementing CMS software should help programs both select and implement their systems with a greater level of confidence and understanding.

C. Who Funded and Conducted this Report?

This report is funded by a Technology Initiative Grant from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) to Legal Aid of East Tennessee (LAET). No funding or support was provided by any CMS vendor. While LAET and LSC both participated in reviewing the final document, all opinions and conclusions are those of the authors. The authors of the report are Colleen Cotter⁴ and Julia Gordon,⁵ independent legal services consultants who responded to a Request for Proposal circulated by LAET in March 2003.

³ Some readers may be hoping for more specific information about the various CMS products available on the market right now. Unfortunately, an in-depth examination of every single feature of every available system would have required resources far in excess of what was available for this study. Also software does not lend itself to description on paper but needs screen shots or preferably a live demonstration. Moreover, development of CMS software is so rapid that even the limited attempt made in this report to provide system-specific information will begin to be outdated even before this report is published.

⁴ Colleen Cotter previously worked for Indiana Legal Services, Inc., where she served as Director of Programs and Organizational Development and Director of the Indiana Justice Center and both used a case management system and participated in selecting a new one. Ms. Cotter previously worked for Pine Tree Legal Assistance in Maine as a staff attorney. Her recent experience includes researching outcomes and performance measures; conducting program evaluation; facilitating the reconfiguration of 4 programs to 1 program in Indiana; writing grants and reports to more than 50 different funders; updating a legal work management manual; and developing training for new and experienced legal services staff and partners. Ms. Cotter is a graduate of the University of Notre Dame and Indiana University School of Law – Bloomington.

⁵ Julia Gordon has worked with legal services providers nationally for many years, most recently as a Senior Staff Attorney at the Center for Law and Social Policy and prior to that as the Deputy Director of Equal Justice Works. Her projects include managing a groundbreaking national study of the effectiveness of telephone hotlines in providing legal advice to low-income clients (the Hotline Outcomes Assessment Study);

D. Where Did the Information in this Report Come From?

Research for this report consisted of a multi-pronged inquiry. The authors viewed demonstrations of eight systems and required the vendors to fill out a lengthy written questionnaire about their systems.⁶ The systems included are:⁷

- ✓ Client Advocacy Support System (CASS), developed by Draper Systems.
- ✓ Clients for Windows, developed by Kemp's Case Works.
- ✓ Legal Files, developed by Legal Files Software.
- ✓ Legal Server, developed by PSTI in partnership with Network Ninja.
- ✓ Pika, developed by Pika Software.
- ✓ Practice Manager, developed by RealLegal.
- ✓ ProLaw, developed by ProLaw Software, a division of West.
- ✓ TIME, developed by the Western New York Law Center.

The authors also sought the input of the larger community by distributing a questionnaire for CMS users, which was distributed by LSC to all LSC-funded programs; the authors received back 166 completed questionnaires from the staff of 42 different programs using 4 different systems.⁸

Finally, the authors conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with over 150 staff members at 15 different legal services programs or groups of programs selected for diversity of size, geographic location, technological sophistication, and funding source.⁹ Staff positions interviewed included program directors, managing attorneys, supervisors, staff attorneys, paralegals,

conducting a national campaign to help the equal justice community harness technology to improve service to clients; offering numerous trainings on technology-related issues; convening national technology strategy groups; writing papers and articles on technology, legal services, and digital divide issues; and serving as a grant reviewer for the Legal Services Corporation Technology Innovation Grants program. Ms. Gordon is a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Law School and previously served as a litigation associate and pro bono coordinator at the Washington, DC, law firm of Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering.

⁶ The responses to those questionnaires are attached as Appendices C through J.

⁷ This report included only those systems that are currently supported by the vendor, under continual development, and being marketed actively to the national legal services community.

⁸ That questionnaire is attached as Appendix K. Because the responses received were very unevenly distributed both among systems used and programs responding, the authors have chosen not to present the ratings received as an independent finding of this report. However, the authors did use the results of this survey to inform their in-depth interviews and to provide additional information where necessary.

⁹ Staff were interviewed at: CARPLS (Chicago); Connecticut programs (Connecticut Legal Services, Greater Hartford Legal Assistance, Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut, and New Haven Legal Assistance); Iowa Legal Aid, Legal Aid Bureau of Maryland, Legal Aid Justice Center (Virginia), Legal Aid of North Carolina, Legal Aid of East Tennessee, Legal Assistance Corporation of Central Massachusetts, Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, Nebraska Legal Services, Northwest Justice Project, Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services Corporation, Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services, and West Tennessee Legal Services.

intake specialists, IT support personnel, pro bono coordinators, administrators, and development specialists.¹⁰

In each section of this report, the authors note from which of these sources information was obtained. At the outset, however, it is important to point out two important factors regarding the reliability of the information in this report. First, the authors did not have an equal amount of information about each system. While the goal was to interview at least two programs per CMS, some of the systems reviewed have been on the market for many years and are used by a large number of programs, while some newer systems included in this report were being used by only one program or had only been used for a short period of time.

This inequality of information may introduce some skew into the data. On the one hand, a piece of software that has been around for a while may elicit more negative comments as users have had years to consider what they would like to see improved; on the other hand, a user might like a system better or find it easier to use once he or she has become more comfortable with it. It is the authors' view that these different considerations do balance out to a large degree, but readers should be mindful of this problem.

Second, many staff members do not fully understand the capabilities of their own system. Thus, in many cases, the information presented here is the authors' best effort to reconcile the perspectives of users and vendors. More information about how these perspectives were reconciled is provided in each section of this report.

II. Overall Considerations in Buying and Implementing a Case Management System

To purchase and implement CMS software effectively, it is important for a program to consider its own case management needs methodically and in the context of the program's mission and set of activities. It is equally important to identify and consider the financial and staff resources available to support and develop the CMS.

A. The Importance of an Inclusive Process

While many programs leave the decision of which CMS to buy and how it should be implemented up to the program director and other top managers in consultation with any IT staff, research for this report suggests the importance of a more inclusive and broad-based process. A selection or implementation committee need not be large, but it should be representative and its members

¹⁰ The authors also reviewed the work of John Tull, who is evaluating the use of Legal Files in North Carolina, and the work of Anthony White, who evaluated the use of Clients for Windows at Bay Area Legal Aid in San Francisco, CA.

should thoroughly understand the various functions and work flows of the organization.

It is particularly important to include intake specialists and staff attorneys in a meaningful way. These staff members use the CMS on a daily basis far more than upper management, and they are responsible for the input of the data that managers will later use for reports. If those responsible for input feel comfortable with the system, the data that managers get out of the system will be much cleaner and more reliable and it is likely that staff will more fully use the CMS.

Effective ways to include staff in the CMS purchase or implementation process include creating a broad-based selection or implementation committee; offering to include anyone who is interested in any demonstrations of systems by vendors; and using program-wide interviews and focus groups (paper surveys of staff are popular, but in reality are significantly less useful than more open-ended conversations).

B. Case Reporting v. Case Management

A preliminary question to ask in selecting a CMS is whether a system that focuses on case reporting or on case management is a better fit for your program. This distinction characterizes an essential difference among various systems or groups of systems. A case reporting system centers on the need to collect, report on, and analyze data about cases, clients, and casehandling. Data is collected through the intake process, timekeeping, and case notes; it is reported on by running the data through various queries; and it is analyzed by looking at report results to draw conclusions about program operations. The early legal services “case management systems” were all essentially case reporting systems, driven primarily by the ever-increasing data collection demands of the Legal Services Corporation as well as other funders.

A case management system, on the other hand, includes the intake/report information loop, but at its heart is a collection of tools designed to assist with casehandling itself, particularly litigated cases. These systems focus on robust electronic case files containing all relevant documents and information associated with the case (generally meant to replace paper files), calendaring, timekeeping, and tickler systems connected directly to the case or matter files, and complex relational databases that enable sophisticated client and contact management.

Both types of systems have supervisory tools to help managers keep track of the work of the staff they supervise. The case reporting systems allow programs to generate reports regarding the number and types of cases handled and the time spent on them and on other activities. Case management systems

also provide tools that allow supervisors to access case work easily, including case notes and documents generated and received by the casehandler.

In recent years, the line between these two types of system has become increasingly blurred. The developers of case reporting systems are adding more traditional case management features, while developers of case management systems (generally hailing from the private sector) are creating a more robust intake front end along with the larger library of preformatted reports needed by legal services programs.

That said, most systems still maintains a “flavor” of being oriented toward one priority or the other, and user comments suggest that the orientation can affect the attitude of program staff toward the software. A CMS with a case reporting orientation tends to do a very good job handling LSC-required data, and sometimes an equally good job with data for other funders or purposes. However, such systems also may be viewed by staff as “something the managers need us to use so they can do their reporting.”¹¹ In other words, the requirement that they put intake information into the computer, as well as keep time, case notes, and other information in the CMS, is not really about their own work; it’s simply for the convenience of management.¹² While staff members who view the CMS this way generally use the system as required, many do not go beyond the basic requirements and do not see the system as a tool for enhancing their own client service and performance or the performance of the program as a whole. Having a CMS that is focused on case reporting can reinforce the view that what management or the program cares about is the number of cases processed.

Systems with a case management orientation, on the other hand, are viewed sometimes as important tools to support the work of casehandlers and sometimes as a collection of unnecessary “bells and whistles.” At best, the availability of a robust tool to support cases and matters is seen as a way for staff to enhance their own productivity (as one former private sector attorney put it, “without my own administrative assistant I could not practice law if I didn’t have this system”) and as a way to support the program’s more extensive work beyond basic advice and brief services. At worst, a program buys an expensive case management system that is used only as a tool for intake and reporting, when those may not even be the system’s most effective features.

Thus, in making the CMS choice, a program should think about which orientation it wants to emphasize and why. As one director put it, “The CMS

¹¹ This is not an exact quote from one individual, but a composite of remarks heard at almost all the interviews conducted.

¹² While staff members understand that one of the main reasons management needs the data is to satisfy the requirements of funders, not everyone feels a personal connection to the need to satisfy funders, even though obviously each person’s continued employment depends on the funding. This lack of connection sometimes manifests itself as resentment toward the CMS when it is really part of a much broader management issue. Thus, sometimes anti-CMS sentiments can be a symptom of deeper staff problems.

should reinforce mission, not determine it.” For example, a hotline program, or a program that has made the decision to focus mainly on advice, brief services, and more routine cases, may find that it is much more cost effective and makes more sense to the staff to use a CMS oriented toward case reporting. On the other hand, a program choosing to emphasize more complex litigation or an approach based on more community work rather than individual cases may see the choice of a case management system as a way to move more in that direction.¹³

C. What Else Does Your Program Want to Do With its CMS?

Beyond examining the question of case management versus case reporting, a program must determine with more specificity:

- ✓ What functions do staff members need to perform for the program to operate effectively?
- ✓ What do people wish they could do that they cannot now do?
- ✓ What type of work does your program do – mostly brief advice, a lot of litigation, and/or extensive community legal education?
- ✓ What existing software packages do staff use extensively now, and what do they like about them?
- ✓ What kind of support and supervision do you have (or wish you had) for new staff and volunteers?
- ✓ What kind of information do you need for high-quality supervision and management?
- ✓ What kind of information about your work and your clients do your funders require?
- ✓ What kind of information do you need for resource allocation, self-assessment and evaluation?
- ✓ Does your program have multiple offices and/or intake sites?
- ✓ Do you want to coordinate your CMS with other programs and, if so, what security measures will be required to maintain client confidentiality?

It is challenging to envision how work flow looks or how it could change. To open up thinking, it might be helpful to find a similarly situated program and learn how they do their work and use their CMS. Sometimes a program may want to bring in an outside consultant to facilitate a brainstorming session. Or, ideas can flow from clients and partner organizations.

As part of the assessment of your program's current needs, answer each of the questions listed above for a period of time five years from now. Then, you can more easily determine whether the case management systems you are

¹³ A program using a robust case management system reported that selecting the system – even though its capabilities were initially far more than the program required – enabled the program to grow and expand in unexpected and welcome ways.

considering will grow with you or whether you will need to choose a new system in a few years.

Several users said that while they were not yet using all of the features available in their systems, their program had chosen the system intending to grow into it and were happy with that choice. As new staff members join the program with expectations and knowledge about case management systems and other software, these programs believe that their use of the CMS will continue to grow. Other programs may prefer to purchase a more basic system at this time, knowing they will outgrow it, but also knowing that when they are ready for a more full-featured system, they may at that time be able to benefit from further advancements in technology and CMS development.

D. What Internal Resources Are Available to Support the CMS?

Every program must decide what internal resources it is willing and able to commit to the purchase and implementation of the CMS. Internal resources include budget realities, availability of technology support staff, and management/staff involvement in or commitment to developing the CMS features.

1. How Much Does a CMS Cost?

It is very difficult to compare costs across systems due to differences in pricing structure and wide variation in data conversion costs. However, there are several aspects of cost that you should consider when deciding whether to purchase a new system or which system to purchase.

First, find out whether the system is priced per user (also referred to as per “seat” or per “Client Access Licence” or “CAL”) or whether the charge is per program and/or per office. Some systems use a hybrid pricing schedule with a basic charge either per program or per server, with per user charges on top of that. Some systems separate costs for system purchase and system maintenance/support, while others combine those costs.

Second, ask about volume discounts. Most CMS vendors do offer discounts, particularly for very large volumes such as a statewide program. Some vendors will allow more than one program to make purchases together and receive a volume discount even if the systems will be run separately at each of the programs.

Third, fully explore installation and conversion costs. Basic installation costs generally will be on a standardized schedule, perhaps bundled with training costs. Conversion costs, however, can vary widely, and can make a tremendous financial difference. Factors to consider include whether your current system is compatible with the new system; how clean your current data is; and whether you

are merging databases from more than one program or office. In addition to any monetary charges incurred from the vendor, conversion will also “cost” staff time spent cleaning up data and overseeing the conversion, as well as the downtime as the system is actually converted over.

Fourth, find out about any future charges, such as the costs and frequency of upgrades, and whether there are annual renewal costs. The eight systems reviewed in this report varied widely in this area.

A fifth consideration is whether your current technology infrastructure is sufficient to run any given system or whether you will need to spend a lot of money in that area as well. CMS software will have minimum requirements for your program’s server and workstations related to operating systems and capacity (processor speed, memory, drive space, etc.).¹⁴ Most systems also require that you license your own operating system and database software, which is an extra cost if it is not the system you are already using (the exception being that systems built using open source software will not have such additional costs). For programs with multiple offices, you will also have to consider the cost of installing a WAN or buying commercial bandwidth.

In Appendices C through J to this report, you can find some cost information in the answers to Questions 11 and 12 of the vendor surveys. Please note that this information is subject to change at any time, and that each vendor does not necessarily address all of the considerations outlined above.

2. How Much IT Support Do You Need?

A number of factors relate to your IT staff needs. One such consideration is the configuration of your system.¹⁵ There are two major models: systems that are hosted and supported in-house, and Application Service Provider (ASP) systems. In-house configurations include databases maintained on a data server and accessed by users through a dedicated Wide Area Network (WAN) or over the internet using a thin-client program such as Citrix; and websites maintained by a program and accessed by users over the internet using a web browser. For in-house systems, a further consideration is what technology you use to enable multiple offices to access the system. ASP models include web-based systems that are accessed through a regular web browser as well as systems accessed through “thin client” software.

For programs using an in-house system, it is critical to ensure robust in-house support. Interviews revealed that staff members were happiest with their systems when in-house IT support was adequate. In situations where an office manager was doubling as an IT support person, or where one IT support person

¹⁴ Full information on technical requirements for each system can be found in Appendices C through J.

¹⁵ More information about the configuration possibilities for each CMS reviewed in this report can be found in Section III, part L, “Access and Security.”

was supporting a large and/or geographically dispersed program (particularly in post-merger situations), users were not using the CMS as well or as happily as in programs with adequate IT support and changes, customization, and custom reports were not getting done in a timely manner.

Based on these interviews, the authors suggest that for a large program (more than 40 users) or a program with multiple offices, it is best to have at least two staff people supporting the CMS – one to support the network and the other to support the database and staff use of the software itself, including training (these functions can be split up any number of ways).

For programs using an ASP, your in-house support requirements may be lessened somewhat because you are not responsible for keeping the database up and running. However, you will still need an expert available to help users learn and use the software, generate custom reports, and maintain the appropriate internet connection so that users can access the database.

Another factor to consider is whether you plan to do a lot of customization to whatever CMS you buy.¹⁶ While you can usually purchase additional customization from the vendor, you may choose to have experts on staff who know something about programming and can help customize the look and feel of the system, design reports, and create new modules especially for your program. For “open source” CMS software – systems that make the underlying program code available to you – finding a good programmer either as in-house staff or as an outside consultant can be especially useful.

The more full-featured a system you purchase, the more technology support you will need to devote to your system. This support includes help desk support; on-going training; trouble-shooting and communicating with the vendor about problems; tracking changes that staff members would like to see and communicating those to the vendor; and supporting all of the hardware and software that allows staff members to connect to the CMS.

Also relevant is the technological sophistication of staff. For example, staff members who have not previously used a computerized CMS will face a much steeper learning curve as they move off of a paper system. Casehandlers coming to a program straight from law school, a clerkship, or the private sector will be accustomed to using technology for everything, whereas those who have been working in legal services for many years have already developed and committed to their own systems, which are generally much less technologically sophisticated.¹⁷

¹⁶ Almost every vendor will tell you that a lay person can learn to customize their system, but even when the customization does not require any programming knowledge, interviews for this report strongly suggest that it is never a particularly easy process and program staff with other responsibilities will rarely take the time to learn how to do it.

¹⁷ This is obviously a gross generalization, but true far more often than not.

Related to the above consideration is whether the CMS integrates well with other software upon which your staff is currently reliant. Integration refers to the ability of the CMS software to talk to other software and transmit data back and forth. For example, a CMS that integrates with Outlook will enable a user to enter a calendar entry through the CMS that will also appear on that person's Outlook calendar. This may eliminate the need for double entry by the staff member who wants to continue to use Outlook for his or her out of office appointments. While a few less robust CMS systems do not integrate with any other software, most of the systems have some integration, and the issue is a matter of degree. In selecting a CMS, if a system integrates well with another robust software package, such as Outlook, Crystal Reports, or HotDocs, it is not as important to your decision how well that system's own versions of these functions work.¹⁸

If staff already rely heavily on certain software with which they feel comfortable and which they are not likely to abandon without a fight, it might make the most sense to choose a CMS that integrates with that software to minimize the need for staff to learn new programs and to eliminate the duplication of function that almost invariably results when staff are told they have to use the CMS for a function, such as calendaring, while they also want to continue to use what they like.¹⁹

3. Commitment from Managers and Staff

Programs often fail to consider fully the need for non-technical support in implementing a CMS effectively. Given limited resources and the numerous competing interests, it is hard to devote attorney time to the CMS. However, in order to take advantage of the many functions available through the various systems, programs should be prepared to assign staff to developing tools and supporting the use of the case management system. Such tools include: work plans for various types of cases; templates of letters, forms and pleadings for document assembly; intake questionnaires; and links to research tools.

Management also needs to be involved in the use and development of the case management system. Yet as one manager put it, "In legal services, we mostly manage by crisis. In the limited time we have left to do proactive management work, do we want to spend that time on the CMS, or on fundraising, or developing other program areas?" If management is not ready to commit to implementing a CMS fully – including learning to use it themselves – it may not

¹⁸ More information on integration is provided on a feature-by-feature basis in Appendix A.

¹⁹ Good integration can also prevent mistakes and damaged data. For example, most systems integrate easily with Word, but less easily with WordPerfect. Users who still use WordPerfect may end up introducing errors into their data by cutting and pasting WordPerfect documents into the CMS.

make sense to buy a system with many features that will require extensive time and attention.

Much of the implementation work requires the commitment of both management and casehandling staff in committees to develop tools such as document templates or intake questionnaires. Committees should include staff who understand the technological implementation of the tools, administrative staff who understand the reporting implications of any changes, and case-handling staff with experience in the various substantive areas involved. In many programs interviewed, various implementation projects were stalled in committee, either because staff members could not agree on a template for pleadings, for example, or because there was no clear assignment of the tasks to staff members who were busy with other work. To overcome this roadblock management might assign responsibility and authority to someone to move the process along and to make a decision in case of deadlock.

Another issue is whether management is ready to require staff to use a full-featured CMS. A common theme in the interviews was that the tools provided by the various case management systems would be so much more valuable if all staff members actually used them and used them consistently. For example, the electronic case notes function is much less useful if casehandlers do not use it regularly and consistently, and demographic and case routing information becomes unreliable and confusing if staff members do not use the same definitions. Much of the value of a robust CMS is the ability to standardize operations and to make all information available electronically program-wide. If management is unable or unwilling to challenge the culture of complete attorney autonomy prevalent in many legal services programs, some features of a CMS may be much less useful or necessary.

E. The Importance of Training

Training for staff is the single most important part of the implementation process. Budgeting enough time for staff training is crucial. Many successful implementation processes included giving staff members significant time off from their regular duties to play around with the new system and get a feel for it. Successful trainings include written documentation that staff can refer to after the training is over; “hands-on” training rather than a powerpoint presentation; the special training of “power users” in each office who can serve as resources once the training is over and people get back to work;²⁰ and on-line tutorials developed specifically for your staff.

Moreover, a training plan needs to extend beyond the initial installation of the system. Most people learn better after they have been using the system for a period of time and are ready to move past the basic functions. Also, new staff

²⁰ Choose these “power users” carefully. If you are going to rely on them to train others be sure to choose staff who are good trainers themselves.

members not on board at the time of the initial installation need formal training on the system, not just a quick 15 minutes provided by their supervisor or colleague in the course of their overall introduction to the office. The majority of users interviewed said they had received only on-the-job training or just one training session, and that they had not received written documentation.²¹

F. Other Implementation Issues

Data conversion and system installation is a process that can take significant time and cause delays, problems, and frustration. In selecting a CMS, find out about your vendor's track record for conversions.²² It will be critical to make sure that your staff members have the information they need during conversion. The best conversion processes have a clear plan; keep staff apprised of the process at all times; and take as little time as possible.

Similarly, if you are installing a new WAN or other system to create connectivity among offices at the same time you are implementing the CMS, take as much care with that process as you will in selecting the CMS. A number of programs we interviewed experienced significant initial instability in their Citrix systems or internet connections. Staff members, however, do not distinguish between a problem with Citrix and a problem with the CMS. Thus, if the early days of the new CMS are characterized by instability and a lack of connectivity, the first impression of the CMS will be negative, and that impression can color staff attitudes for far longer than it takes to resolve the technical problems. Management should be mindful of this problem and make every effort to work out the bugs in the connectivity system before rolling out the CMS, even if it costs extra to do so.²³

IV. What Features Should You Look for in a Case Management System?

In assessing your program's needs and capacity, it is helpful to understand the features or functionalities available in current CMS systems. First, determine whether you need a particular category of feature, such as document assembly or calendaring. Then, within those broader categories, consider how flexible and/or robust you need that feature to be.

²¹ While several systems offer large manuals or on-line help screens, not many people use either. Most people prefer very basic, short "how-to" sheets (a page or two); beyond that, they prefer to ask an IT support person or other power user for help.

²² There were too many variables involved to explore the conversion process in the research for this report (some conversions had been done years ago and staff had turned over; many programs had converted from a paper system to their current CMS; and too many intervening factors were present).

²³ No matter how good your implementation plan is, how well you train your staff, and how much you keep to schedule, a change in case management system will be very stressful for your staff. Even those persons whom we interviewed who expressed dissatisfaction with their current CMS were resistant to changing the system. Users tend to be comfortable with what they know and suspicious that a new system will be difficult to learn and will not provide enough additional tools to justify the disruption caused by the change. An inclusive process in which all staff members' views are heard will help to alleviate some of the resistance to a CMS change.

For more information about how these features are represented in currently available CMS software, see Appendix A to this report. The chart in Appendix A provides a ready checklist of the various features available and indicates whether the eight systems reviewed have those features or subfeatures. It also provides some additional comments relating to each of the systems reviewed.

A. *Timekeeping*

All LSC-funded programs must have some way to track time in compliance with the LSC regulation,²⁴ and most programs are beginning to use time to track expenditures for other funders as well as for internal supervision, management, and planning purposes. All of the case management systems reviewed allow programs to track time in the following ways:

- ✓ Batch time. Users can enter time at the end of the day (or at any time). This function is particularly useful for those who are away from their desk for hours or days at a time in court, meetings, conferences, etc.
- ✓ Contemporaneous time. The CMS's timer runs while the user is engaged in a particular activity. This function has various features, depending on the CMS. Some CMS timers automatically launch when an electronic file on a case, matter, or activity is opened. Others require users to press a button to start time running. In some systems, time automatically pauses when the user minimizes a window and moves to another case, matter, or activity, at which point time on that other case, matter or activity starts to run.

Some CMS timekeeping functions have additional useful features, such as transferring notes on a time slip directly into a case file; automatically tracking the activities in which the user was engaged while working on the file and entering them onto the time slip and which the computer can recognize (e.g., document drafting, emailing, or research); allowing a user to manually associate their time with a particular grant or function (such as PAI); or providing for an integrated time and attendance function so that staff members need only enter time once, using the CMS to track vacation, sick, holiday and other leave time as well as time spent on individual matters.

B. *Calendaring/Tickler Systems*

More programs are moving to some form of electronic calendaring, such as Outlook. An electronic calendar that is integrated with a case management system can provide a number of beneficial features, including:

²⁴ 45 C.F.R. Part 1635.

- ✓ Tickler system. When integrated with a CMS, users need only enter their list of things to do once. It will appear in the appropriate electronic case file, on their calendar, and on their to-do list, and they will receive reminders through the electronic tickler system. An office- or organization-wide tickler and to-do system often allows individuals to tickle other staff members.
- ✓ Different groupings. This is an important feature and will help determine whether the calendar system is usable or not. A good calendar system will allow the user to view the calendar from several different perspectives, including his or her own calendar, calendars for other designated individuals, calendars for a particular office, unit, or work group, or calendars for groups such as all managers or all supervisors.
- ✓ Integrated with other calendar system. Many users have become comfortable with a calendaring system that is outside their CMS, such as Outlook. Some CMS developers have devoted resources to ensuring that their CMS is fully integrated with more popular calendaring software so that users need not give up these systems in order to have one that is integrated with their CMS.
- ✓ Pre-set rules. Some systems allow users to automate some calendaring functions using pre-set rules. For example, if a program decides that it wants all staff attorneys to follow a certain protocol when handling an eviction case, the program can enter the protocol with due dates based on specific trigger dates, such as the date of intake or a hearing, into the CMS. When a staff attorney is assigned an eviction case, the due dates associated with it are inserted automatically on the staff attorney's calendar.
- ✓ Incorporation with case files. Some systems allow users to enter deadlines which appear on the user's calendar, to do list, tickler system and in the electronic case file itself. This feature allows users to enter deadlines only once.

C. *Contact Management*

Contact management keeps track of all the people with whom a program interacts. Contacts include persons related to a case, such as clients and adverse parties, plus household members, witnesses, experts, court reporters, case workers, adverse attorneys, and judges. Contacts also include other friends of the program, such as donors, pro bono attorneys, partner organizations and their staffs, and other people with whom the program has a relationship.

In the past, case-related contacts have mainly been tracked within the context of a case file (either paper or electronic, using a case notes function).

With a computerized contact management function, case-related contacts go into a large rolodex-like database, where they can be located without needing to know the name or reference number of a case. Their entry in the rolodex will include links to all the cases in which they are involved, along with any other appropriate information. For example, a client may be involved with more than one case, as might a medical expert or other witness. Or, a pro bono attorney might volunteer on several cases and also donate money to the program.

A relational contact management system allows a program to make changes about a contact in only one place. When an attorney moves, the program makes that change in address only once in the CMS and the new address appears in all cases or matters with which that attorney is associated.

With a good contacts management system, everyone from the program can share the same base of knowledge about certain people. All the contacts a program has had with an individual can be tracked instantly and easily. A pro bono coordinator will not contact a pro bono attorney without knowing that person should also be thanked for her support of the program. A casehandler will not unknowingly contact a witness who turns out to be an adverse party in another case handled by the program. Casehandlers can also use the database to locate appropriate expert witnesses or to find other program cases in which a particular judge has ruled.

The contacts system may also be the base of a good referral or pro bono system. However, there are some good referral and pro bono systems that do not have all of the functions described above.

In selecting a CMS, you might also want to know whether you can integrate the internal contact management function with any other software you may use for this purpose, such as Outlook.

D. Intake, Eligibility, Opening and Closing Cases

Intake is a crucial part of legal services program operations that relates directly to program quality on a daily basis. It is also a part of the operation that can benefit greatly from automation. Through intake, you gather the information your program needs to determine whether you should accept a case and what level of services you will provide. An intake system can also provide tools to assist clients, can help ensure that double entry of information is not necessary, and can gather information in a form that is organized and searchable for later reporting. In addition, the CMS should allow you to gather the information you need at the close of your case.

How well the intake function will meet your program's needs will depend on several elements:

- ✓ Does it capture all of the information you need to determine whether to accept a case and later report on that case? Some systems are limited in the amount of information you can gather and the form in which you can gather it. As programs diversify funding and funders impose new reporting requirements, programs need more flexibility in data gathering.
- ✓ Does it automate some screening functions? Intake can be streamlined if the CMS automates income, asset, and immigrant status eligibility. Some systems only automate factors related to LSC eligibility and do not allow programs to enter additional eligibility screening tools for other grants. Some systems may allow programs to enter various eligibility factors for grants so that the CMS then provides a list of appropriate funding sources based on the data entered, such as county, income, household status, housing status, domestic violence and age.
- ✓ Does the information entered into the intake module automatically transfer to the case file so that data does not need to be entered twice and all data becomes part of the electronic case file? For example, do staff members need to enter client data only once, or does data sometimes need to be entered in the intake module, in the case file, and in the contacts file/name cards?
- ✓ Does the system support electronic questionnaires? Many programs use paper intake questionnaires for various substantive areas of law. Automating these, particularly when they can be associated with variables such as problem code and county, streamline and improve intake. The use of branching logic allows programs to create “if A then B” scenarios that add a level of sophistication to the questionnaires and can help focus intake on relevant issues.
- ✓ Does the system provide key-stroke saving techniques? Many systems will default to some information, such as the office and intake person. Others will complete the city, state, and county based on the zip code entered. These type of key-stroke savers can save time during intake, as can drop-down lists, which are used by all the systems to some extent.
- ✓ Does the intake function give the program flexibility for inputting and searching names? Some systems limit the number of searchable additional household members and adverse party names.
- ✓ Does the system support the use of “wild card” characters or “sounds like” search functions to help locate names?²⁵ These features help programs

²⁵ A wild card character is a placeholder such as * that you can use to search variations on a name; for example, using Gold* will bring up Gold, Goldberg, Golden, Goldansohn, etc. A “sounds like” search function uses a computer algorithm to seek out alternate spellings for names that might have different sounds, such as Gordon, Gordan, and Gordin.

find case files that were entered with incorrect spelling or with hyphenated last names.

- ✓ Does the system allow you to gather information at the close of your case, including outcomes?

E. Conflict Checking

All the systems provide for conflict checking to preclude the need to search through paper cards. For conflict checking, accuracy, speed, and flexibility are very important. A good conflict checking system requires few steps; can be performed from the intake screen or from the case file; searches through all persons associated with cases, including witnesses and other household members; searches potential staff conflicts, such as when a staff member is also a landlord; preserves the conflict check as part of the case file; and allows staff to narrow the search when dozens of names match by using factors such as age, middle name, social security number, or by looking at a prospective conflict's underlying case without leaving the conflict check screen. Some systems can even search all fields within cases, not just name fields, enabling them to locate names that have been typed into case notes, but for which a contact card has not been created.

F. Maintaining Electronic Files / Document Management

Every CMS by definition maintains some form of electronic case file. In the most basic systems, the case file includes the full range of demographic and eligibility information along with initial information about the client's legal problem. In most systems, including all those reviewed here, there is also space to keep electronic notes about the case (case notes) as part of the file.

Thus, anyone with proper access to the system can locate case files electronically and review some basic information about any case in the system. If the system supports extensive case notes and document management, the electronic case file can be used instead of a paper file. The better the case file, the better it facilitates supervision, consultation, and co-counseling by staff in different offices. Coverage for sick or vacationing workers is much easier, and case files can easily be transferred from one place to another, enabling more efficient work on the part of hotlines or other centralized intake units. Supervisors can stay on top of what lawyers and paralegals are doing on their cases and can follow up on cases that remain open without any activity.

A CMS with a document management feature enables the electronic file to contain documents associated with a case, from the client retainer letter to pleadings to emails. In other words, any document that has been created

electronically or converted to an electronic document through scanning²⁶ can be associated with a particular case file and immediately accessed by anyone pulling up the case electronically. Reviewing a case online, then, is as easy and comprehensive as reviewing the paper file.

Some systems create a document library for each case file, essentially a list of files from which the user can pull up the document referred to in whatever form it was created (Word document, email, PDF file). The actual document can either be stored within the CMS database itself or be housed elsewhere and linked to the case. Less advanced systems require users to cut and paste those documents into the case notes in order to track them. The usefulness of this type of system is limited because case notes quickly become unwieldy, document formatting is lost, and documents are not easily modified.

The layout of the electronic case file is important. The electronic case file should help the staff members organize their work and information and documents must be easy to find and get to, or it will not be used. For example, many systems reviewed will keep every document associated with a case in the case file directory, but the documents cannot be categorized into subdirectories, which can be a problem for a case with a lot of activity (and for users accustomed to using Word, WordPerfect or Outlook subdirectories).

Another important issue is whether the electronic case file tracks the activities of the persons involved in the case. How well does the CMS help a supervisor understand what was done, when and by whom in a case or matter? Can you easily assign and change a primary casehandler? Can you track different roles such as pro bono attorney, supervising attorney, intake specialist, etc.? Can you track the work of multiple casehandlers on the same case or matter? This tracking can be particularly important if your program has projects such as community legal education, or cases that require the involvement of a number of different staff members.

Some systems also enable users to develop checklists or workplans for casehandlers to make sure they know all the steps involved in a certain type of case, such as a child custody case. These checklists can be either static or dynamic; they might also integrate with a CMS's calendar and tickler system. A program can establish minimum standards for various types of cases, and guidelines to assist casehandlers in analyzing and handling cases. These workplans can also include links to research tools available on the web, to relevant code or regulatory sections, and to form pleadings and internal training materials. Such tools can prove helpful to less experienced staff members, to supervisors, and to programs that enter into a new area of work due to a special grant, a new client need, or a change in the law.

²⁶ Documents scanned as PDF files are generally not searchable or editable unless they have received special treatment.

Some questions to ask about a CMS's electronic case filing system include whether you can email from within the system and have those emails automatically associated with the case file (check on both incoming and outgoing emails); whether you can search case notes; whether you can search the full text of all searchable documents associated with the case file; and whether all the same features available for case files are also available for non-case (matter or activity) files, without having to create a complicated work-around or have those files cluttered with fields that are not relevant.

G. Document Assembly

Just as legal practice was dramatically altered by the development of word processing programs, which enabled casehandlers to re-use documents over and over simply by changing names or other information in a previously created document, it is now being altered by document assembly systems that take the advantages of word processing a major step further.

Document assembly programs provide preformatted templates of text documents such as letters and pleadings. An advantage of template-based systems over re-using a word processing document is that the user does not need to worry about making sure all the names and relevant facts have been changed consistently throughout the document, as the template always starts "empty" and then prompts for the various pieces of information it needs about the client and the case.

A further advantage of having a document assembly system associated with a database such as a CMS is that the template can pull all the necessary information directly from that which has already been entered into the database, such as names, addresses and other information. It enables the creation of routine correspondence and documents literally with the push of a button, in some cases completely formatted on office letterhead and ready for printing.

Different CMS choices present different options for document assembly. Some systems provide only for short letters that are preformatted so that most sections cannot easily be edited by individual users. Some permit you to insert your own program's or office's letterhead; others do not. Others provide very robust document assembly systems that permit the creation of lengthy templates, all parts of which are easily editable by users on a case-by-case basis.

In assessing the importance of a document assembly system in a CMS, there are several issues to consider. One is that many programs already have extensive template libraries through a different software package, either a general word processing package such as Word, or a dedicated document assembly system such as HotDocs. Those programs may not wish to switch to the document assembly system within the CMS, especially if the CMS will

integrate with their existing system and allow the data to be pulled out of the database and placed into the template just as easily.

Another issue is that the document assembly capability that comes with the CMS is useless until the templates themselves are created by each program. That means the program first has to agree on what templates to use, and then someone in the program has to format those documents appropriately (a task that may be quite time consuming for some systems, so it is important to find out how difficult the process is).

H. Pro Bono Support

Most programs will want to know how well the CMS supports their pro bono program. Does the system make it easy to search for pro bono attorneys by specialty, jurisdiction, and/or date of last case accepted? Does it easily track pro bono attorney hours? Can it calculate total hours on an annual (or other) basis?

Programs may also want to consider issues related to pro bono that are mentioned in other parts of this report, such as the contact management feature. It may be particularly useful in supporting both pro bono placement and fundraising if personnel working on pro bono know about the attorney giving histories, and vice versa. Document assembly may also be an important tool for pro bono support, which involves a number of forms and letters that must be created regularly. Similarly, the ease or difficulty of creating reports will be relevant to a pro bono coordinator, who will likely have a significant need to report regularly on cases that are placed outside the office.

I. Reporting

One of the most important functions of a CMS is the ability to report out data that comes into the system. Programs need reports for internal management purposes and for funders and other stakeholders. Most of the systems provide some preformatted reports, including those reports required by LSC, but some provide a far more extensive menu of preformatted reports than others.

Reporting is always more difficult than it seems. The person writing a report must understand the relation between many fields in the case management system, the definitions used by the people entering the data, and the definitions used by the person asking for the report, whether an outside funder or a manager. Some case management systems rely on a reporting system which is internal to the case management system. Others rely on integration with an outside reporting system such as Microsoft Access or Crystal Reports. Both are more robust reporting systems than most built into the systems, but will require more technical knowledge. Where reports are written by

a developer, they are then run by the program and often some variables can be changed for future use. Some systems allow reports to be set up to automatically run at specific intervals, which can be useful for regular management or funder reports.

The concept of searching, filtering or querying within a CMS is generally not all that different from reporting. Search, filter, or query functions enable users to look at the data in the CMS from a particular point of view, e.g., to look at all their open cases and to sort them by date opened, or to look at all clients from a particular neighborhood and sort them alphabetically. In some cases, users can filter several fields at one time, e.g., looking at all open cases within a particular timeframe from a single zip code. In a sense, filtering is not different from reporting, except that a report generally implies a fixed query (the LSC CSR report, for example, always requires the same information) and also implies a format that is appropriate for printing and sharing with others.

Several important issues to consider are:

- ✓ Will the CMS allow you to run new reports in the future that you do not now know you need?
- ✓ Will the CMS allow you to run reports in a format that is useful to you?²⁷
- ✓ How much technological expertise will it take to develop and run reports?

While reporting is a major need for programs, the ability of the various systems to provide reports for programs does not lend itself well to easy determination from the type of chart contained in Appendix A. This is an area in which the only way to determine whether a particular CMS will meet a program's reporting needs is to look specifically at the built-in reports available, examine the skills required to develop additional reports, and explore the developer's support for providing additional reports or helping the program develop reports within the CMS or using other report-writing software.

J. Grants Management / Resource Development

CMS support for program management of various grants and fundraising efforts has become more important as programs have diversified their funding bases. All systems reviewed here enable programs to assign individual cases to a single funding source. However, some programs with multiple funding sources may want to report the same cases to multiple funders (where appropriate) or allocate funds based on a percentage of time spent on the case. Likewise, some work on a particular case may be appropriately allocated to one funding source

²⁷ One manager complained that she was unable to run a particular report for an individual county without running it for all 92 counties in her state. Another complained that he could not run the LSC Case Disclosure Report by casehandler, only by entire program.

or cost center (i.e. PAI) while other work on the case is not. Some case management systems provide more flexibility than others in assigning cases to multiple funding sources, including allocation of different percentages of the case work to different funding sources, and/or permitting specific time slips to be allocated to particular funding sources.

Some programs may want to integrate their CMS with their accounting software. This integration would allow data from the CMS to be exported to the accounting software, including time entries and case allocation information, avoiding the need for duplicative data entry of the same information. An integrated system can help ensure that programs claim all appropriate funds from their various grants and assign the work of staff automatically so that staff members can focus on handling cases for clients rather than worrying about funding streams. None of the programs interviewed have a CMS that is fully integrated with their accounting software, although some are interested in moving in that direction. Some of the systems do integrate with specific accounting packages, generally those that are used by private law firms, but they might not integrate with the accounting system your program uses.

In addition to tracking grants, some systems can track individual donations and pledges. Many programs use separate fundraising software for this function, but an integrated contacts management tool may prove beneficial in avoiding the need for double entry, ensuring the program has current contact information for donors and potential donors, and providing resource development personnel with a complete picture regarding donors and potential donors, particularly information about pro bono and other volunteer experience. This information can be used for distribution of newsletters, annual reports, and other information to potential donors and other partners.

Finally, some systems allow programs to maintain electronic files for their various grants, enabling multiple staff members to work on the same electronic file, and providing a central repository for grant applications, guidelines, contracts, correspondence, reports, both fiscal and substantive, and notes from meetings. To be most useful, these electronic files should be designed differently from case files. They can be designed to capture in searchable fields critical information such as the funder contact information, the amount of the grant, the date the grant begins and ends, the date particular reports are due, and the type of work the grant will fund. This information can also be integrated into the relevant staff members' calendars and tickler systems.

K. Access and Security

There are several aspects of "access" for a CMS. The first has to do with the places from which a user can get into the database. Can you access the database from remote offices? Can you access it from home? What about from any computer with a web browser? While all the systems reviewed here can be

used by a multiple-office program using a WAN or Citrix system, they vary in other respects. As noted in Section IID, some systems are in-house client/server systems, while others are web-based and can be accessed by any computer with an internet connection and web browser without the need to install any client software. Others are web-enabled but require the installation of some software before the system can be accessed from home or elsewhere.

Next, how many people can easily use the system at one time? Does it slow down when many people are using the same feature, such as document assembly? Does the system let you know if two people are using the same file at the same time? Are there problems saving data properly if more than one person is trying to access the same file?

Another issue to consider in selecting a CMS is security: how much control you need over who can access which types of data. What are your general security needs? Do you have a need to stratify access significantly within your program, e.g., do you want only supervisors to be able to look at the cases of other staff, or can anyone look? How many different levels of access do you want to provide? Can you grant particular users access to specific cases? Can you deny particular users access to specific cases?

In some states, several programs use the same CMS, sharing some information like forms, questionnaires, and some contact information, while restricting access to client files and other confidential information. Some programs are also starting to plan for allowing pro bono attorneys to access their cases (and any tools for those cases the program has developed, like document assembly, work plans, etc.), but none of the programs interviewed has yet done so.

All the systems reviewed provide adequate security measures to shield information from people outside the programs and for users to feel confident using them over WANs or the internet. However, systems have very different capabilities when it comes to shielding particular individuals within a program from access to particular case files or other information.

V. Other Important Characteristics of Case Management Systems

In addition to the basic features described in Section III, there are also a number of more general characteristics to look for in case management software. Some of these characteristics become evident through a close review of the software itself; others cannot be determined from a vendor demonstration alone but require a different kind of research (generally information from other users).

In this section, we review some of these characteristics. Specific comments on the eight systems reviewed can be found in Appendix B.

A. User Friendliness

Some systems are more intuitive to use and require less training than others. This user-friendliness can manifest itself in different areas: the ability of staff to use the basic function of the system easily; whether staff members are aware of the various functions and capabilities of the system; the ease of navigation around the system; and the ease of troubleshooting when something goes wrong.

One issue to keep in mind is that more functionality will almost certainly result in a more complex system for the end user. Thus, if a program desires more robust functionality, intuitiveness of use will almost always be less than for a simpler program. Proper training, however, can enable everyone to use the system well.

Some systems also are more user-friendly at the administrative level for whomever is responsible for keeping the system running, customizing it, cleaning up the data, and developing new report forms.

B. Training

As noted in Section II of this report, programs using each of the systems reviewed failed to maximize their staff's use of the CMS in large part due to a lack of training. In interviews, the authors found that staff members frequently did not know how to do something with the CMS or did not even know the CMS had certain functions.²⁸ While most staff members had received some training on the CMS, that training generally took place when the CMS was first installed. Even in programs that had a dedicated "help-desk" person who was viewed as responsive to staff needs there was little if any formal training after staff members began to use the CMS or for new staff who arrived after the CMS did.

This lack of training results in programs failing to reap the benefits of their investment. Additional training is always needed, even for the most intuitive system. Without it, staff members may be able to enter the basic data necessary for them to meet their job requirements, but they will not be able to use the system in the most efficient and effective way, and will not take advantage of all of its functionalities.²⁹

Check with the vendor regarding training for you and your staff. Do they send a trainer to your program? Is that cost included? How many days of

²⁸ In many focus groups for this report, one staff member would complain that their CMS did not do a certain thing, and then another staff member would then explain that the CMS did in fact do such a thing and would proceed to explain the key strokes necessary to accomplish the function. These open conversations about the CMS therefore served as mini-training sessions for staff and also demonstrated vividly the need for additional training.

²⁹ For more suggestions on training, see section III E.

training can you have? Is advanced training available, and at what extra cost? You will also want to find out how flexible they are regarding the style of the training, and whether they prefer to train just a few “power users” or will train the whole staff.

Another aspect of training is whether the vendor provides a manual or other written documentation, and if so, whether that documentation is written in tech-speak or whether it is appropriate for end-users. Many systems are woefully undocumented at present, especially in terms of easy guides for users rather than complex documentation for IT specialists. You might also be interested in whether any kind of email user group exists for the CMS.

C. *Stability*

Stability refers to the basic operation of the database and how often it crashes or is otherwise inaccessible to users. This characteristic is heavily dependent on the overall IT infrastructure of a program, including the availability and experience of in-house IT staff, as well as the experience of the personnel maintaining the database.

Many users cannot distinguish between problems with connectivity, such as a Citrix problem, and problems accessing the CMS itself. All they know is how often they personally cannot access the system. However, even understanding the numerous factors for which a CMS developer bears no responsibility, it is clear that some systems “freeze up” or “go down” more frequently than others, and it is important to explore this issue through talking to other users of the software.

D. *Customization and Flexibility*

All of the systems included in this review allow for some customization. While some systems allow little customization, others not only allow but require considerable customization in order to use the system fully. Still others fall somewhere in between: some customization is allowed, but not much is required. Customization can be divided into three categories:³⁰

- ✓ Changing the basic system in small ways, i.e. changing the order in which fields or screens appear; renaming fields or screens; adding fields in order to gather additional information; or hiding fields or screens that the program does not need.
- ✓ Adding additional features to the system, i.e. adding a document assembly function not made available in the system.

³⁰ Reporting is also an area in which flexibility and customization is important. For a discussion about reporting, please see section III (I).

- ✓ Populating features of the system with custom information for the program, i.e. entering document templates in order to use the document assembly feature within the case management system.

Users indicated that when customization was not available, they would develop their own personal “work-arounds” to deal with these limitations. Some work-arounds are more problematic than others, and some may cause future problems as staff changes and institutional memory lapses, resulting in data not being entered or used consistently as a result of the work-around. On the other hand, some programs prefer not to spend time customizing a system, so they are content with one with less flexibility.

E. Support from the Vendor

No matter how stable or robust the CMS you choose or how many IT personnel you employ, the importance of vendor support cannot be overstated. Simply put, things will go wrong, and nothing is ever as easy as it seems.

Considering that every vendor promises full support, how do you find out how good the support really is? The best research method is, of course, references from other programs. You will want to check in with at least 3-4 other programs using the CMS you are considering to find out how responsive and supportive the vendor is.

There are a number of factors you will want to consider under this general category. First, you need to find out if the vendor offers ongoing support and how that support is offered. Is there a help desk that you can call? How many hours per week is that desk (or other system) staffed? How quickly will someone get back to you? You will want to know as much as possible about the responsiveness of the vendor, i.e., how long it takes to get your phone call returned. While larger companies should theoretically be more accessible than smaller ones, research for this report indicates that the responsiveness level does not depend on size, but rather on whether a particular vendor/developer places a high priority on returning every call or email quickly.

Second, you will want details about the cost and scope of the support. Find out whether the general support package costs extra (beyond the cost of purchasing the system) and if so, exactly how much it will cost and whether those costs will be locked in for a period of time. As for scope, does the vendor just provide support to fix problems with the CMS, or will the company offer ongoing services to help you customize and otherwise get the most out of your system? Here, the size of the company and the number of developers they employ will matter more. If you have a special preformatted report you want written, or a function customized just for your program, a larger organization can generally get the job done faster – but some large companies do drag their feet. You will also

want to find out in as much detail as possible how much it will cost to have the vendor provide additional work on your system.

Third, you want to make sure this vendor will be reliable over time. How long have they been in the CMS business? What is their business plan? You may want to look into their company a little further: how many employees do they have? How many users (seats) do they support for the CMS? Is there any litigation pending against them?

A fourth important aspect of the relationship with the vendor is their knowledge of legal services. As noted earlier in this report, some CMS developers come from a legal services background, and therefore can more easily understand program work flow and needs. Other developers/vendors have just begun to work with legal services programs, but may have extensive knowledge of other types of legal practice. You will want to interview them about their understanding of the work you do, including whether they have anyone in their company with a legal services background and if so whether that person will be your trainer and/or account manager.

If you plan to use a report writer such as Crystal Reports, find out whether the vendor will provide support for this additional software and whether the vendor will help you write more complex reports for you for a reasonable fee.

Finally, you will want to find out how the vendor handles upgrades and patches between formal upgrades. What is the cost structure for obtaining upgraded versions? Do they aim to ensure that new versions don't change the look and feel of the software, or does each new version feel almost like a new system? In between new versions, does the vendor issue patches routinely to all its customers? You may also want to ask references how easily new versions have been installed and whether new features tend to destabilize other parts of the system – a common problem with systems where the developer just keeps adding new sections of code to the old code without extensive testing. And of course, you will want to know if there is a new version coming out soon, which might mean you should wait until that version is on the market, has been installed in a few locations, and appears to be operating smoothly.

VI. Suggestions for Future Research and Development

In the course of doing research for this report, the authors heard a number of suggestions for CMS developers and others who may have the time to think about the future of computerized case management, such as state support organizations, IT centers, and other consultants.

- Conduct an in-depth examination of case management systems from a technical point of view, looking much more in-depth at system

requirements (hardware, software, and staff support) and data management.

- Integrate CMS software with other software that is already widely available and used rather than re-creating the wheel within the individual systems.
- Especially as programs and states further develop their client-oriented websites, consider how to make the systems more interactive for clients, such as enabling clients to submit their intake information directly through the CMS.
- Explore which CMS features are being used most and least by program staff and why, so that future versions can focus on the features that are most useful.
- Learn more about legal services trends in resource development and grant management to ensure that systems are keeping up with new requirements and demands faced by programs.
- Find out what functions of the case management programs are not using, and why. Make modifications and provide training necessary to help programs use those functions.
- Consider how to provide better support for client legal education, systemic advocacy, community collaboration, and other key legal services functions that are not related to individual case work.

VII. Conclusion

While the decision of which case management system to use is a very important decision for your program and one that should be made with great care, the authors of this report wish to emphasize that the single most important factor in how effectively your CMS will support your program is how well your staff members use whichever system you have.

All eight systems reviewed in this report will perform most of the basic functions that any program should need from a CMS. If your staff is well trained on the CMS and familiar with the full range of ways in which the CMS can support their work, the CMS will become a core part of program operations. If your staff only knows how to use one or two features of the CMS, the system can easily turn into nothing more than a very expensive calculator or word processor. Or, if your staff is not well-trained on inputting accurate and useful data, you could spend as much time error-checking your reports as you would spend generating them by hand in the first place.

Because even the most inexpensive CMS is still a significant budgetary commitment, and because retraining staff consumes time, energy, and resources, sometimes a program that is considering purchasing a new system would be best off trying to improve on the system already in place, as long as it is a system that still has support from the vendor/developer. Perhaps the system could work with some additional customization, particularly the addition of some key custom reports, or perhaps managers and staff need additional training (maybe not even just on the workings of the CMS itself, but on the ways in which computerization can improve their service to clients).

Regardless of whether you purchase a new system or improve upon your existing system, here are some other suggestions for improving your use of the system:

- Run an in-house “user group” where users – especially those sharing similar job descriptions – have a specific time set aside to talk about what they would like to do on their system so that users can share information or else formulate a specific query or suggestion for IT staff or the CMS developer.
- Ensure adequate IT support to keep the system running, create custom reports, keep the data clean, and help users learn the system.
- Require every staff person, including management, to attend some kind of training session related to the CMS on an annual basis (and permit additional training if desired).
- Provide user-friendly written documentation for all the key functions that the CMS performs in your office.
- Provide clear CMS protocols for all staff so that everyone is clear on what they should be doing on the CMS (keeping case notes, calendar info, etc.) to maximize its usefulness for the program as a whole.

A good case management system can help your program operate more effectively and efficiently. Putting time and effort into improving the use of computerized case management systems can result in improved staff morale, better information about program operations, and higher quality service to clients.